

# How to Build A Leadership Development Program That Doesn't Disappoint

**Skyline Group, Inc.**  
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After months of preparation, your company's new leadership development program is ready to roll out. You've done your research on the latest learning techniques and identified which high-potential employees should participate. Thanks to this program, you're sure it will take the entire organization to the next level.

Later that day, after their first leadership development session, you see a group of participants leaving the conference room. Eager to know how much they are enjoying the program, you walk over to them. You're about to speak when you overhear their conversation.

"Well, that was a huge waste of time," one employee says. They all murmur in agreement.

Unfortunately, this is a common reality for leadership development programs. They're created with the best intentions and highest expectations, but then ultimately fall flat. In fact, a 2016 survey from Borderless found that 54 percent of executives end up describing their leadership development programs as ineffective.

A main factor behind these failures is that executives and HR managers design and choose these programs without considering employees' needs. Instead, they focus on their overall goals for leadership development. But then employees have to participate in a program that doesn't resonate or engage them.

To overcome this issue, it's important to understand both sides of the leadership development equation. Then leaders' and employees' expectations can line up, increasing the program's success.

Here's a look at some of the biggest disconnections between the expectations and realities of leadership development programs:

## **Your expectations**

### **Expectation #1: The program will improve the bottom line**

The aforementioned Borderless survey found that 43 percent of executives believe leadership development is a driver for ensuring business results. They want their organization to be more successful as a result of a more skilled workforce, so they start a general development program.

### **The reality**

While this is a nice idea, problems soon arise. There are many skills involved in leadership and many ways for leaders to impact a company. Just offering leadership development for the sake of improvement is not specific enough to be effective.

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<http://www.borderless.net/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Survey-Results-Leadership-Development-2016.pdf>

A better approach is to take an honest look at your organization and identify its goals. From there, make a list of what skills your current and emerging leaders are lacking and critical to achieving company objectives.

Then you can begin to look for leadership development solutions that will ensure your leaders are developing the right skills and deploying the right behaviors to allow your company to reach its goals.

Bonus tip: To make sure you're focusing on developing the right skills, have employees take assessments, like Skyline's 360 assessments. This will give you more thorough information about the gaps you need to correct. When employees have completed the program, they can retake the assessment, providing concrete data about how they've improved.

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## **Expectation #2: The organization will become more adaptable**

In almost every industry, organizations are now facing rapid changes in the way business is done. If a company can't keep up, it will quickly suffer. Thus, it's no surprise the Borderless survey found that 34 percent of executives say being able to adapt strategically is a top concern.

### **The reality**

While most companies see an initial increase in innovation and productivity, it wears off. In fact, a 2016 report from Grovo found that 88 percent managers who change their behavior after most leadership development programs go back to their old ways in less than six months. Instead of becoming more adaptable, the company becomes stuck and stagnant.

One reason employees tend to go back to their old habits is many leadership programs lack follow-up. Participants complete the courses but have so much information to process that they only retain part of it. Then when they're faced with a situation in which those skills would have been beneficial, they fall back on old methods that come more easily to them.

<http://a1.grovo.com/asset/whitepapers/good-managers-bad-managers.pdf>

However, when employees have opportunities over time to revisit the information they learned, more begins to sink in. Make leadership development ongoing so employees can continue to practice and build their skills. This can include group-based leadership development that takes place over time or 1:1 coaching.

### **Expectation #3: Succession planning will be easier**

What good is leadership development if it does not help to create the next wave of leaders? Most organizations consider their programs to be long-term investments in the future. The hope being that when senior members of the team leave or retire, they have someone ready to step into the role.

#### **The reality**

After leadership development or not, a 2015 report from WorkplaceTrends.com found that 30 percent of companies are having trouble filling senior leadership roles. This leaves organizations in a real jam. They must either take their chance on someone from outside the company or put someone into a vital role who might not be ready.

The easiest way to keep this from happening is to think about what types of leaders you not only need now, but also might need in the future. Clearly define what traits and skills make your current leadership team successful. Then compare these needs to your leadership development participants.

***Bonus tip:** Never assume that an employee aspires to a certain role. Leadership goals are different for every individual. For some people, becoming a leader does not mean becoming a senior executive. Always have an open discussion with your employees so everyone is on the same page about their career path expectation.*

Take note who is on track to step into a bigger job, as well as in what areas they need more time to grow. This will allow you to adapt your leadership development program so it nurtures and prepares employees for the future.

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<https://workplacetrends.com/the-global-workforce-leadership-survey/>

## Employees' Expectations

Remember that you're only half of the leadership development equation. Your employees are the ones who participate in the program, so their expectations need to be considered. Here is what you need to know about their perspective:

### Expectation #1: Leadership development will help them reach career goals

Leadership development can have a big impact on your organization. But as the ones going through the program, most employees are more concerned about what's in it for them.

Employees view leadership development as a stepping stone in their career. In fact, a 2016 study from the Society for Human Resource Management found that 47 percent of employees say opportunities to advance are very important to their career satisfaction.

#### The reality

While most leadership development programs are designed to prepare employees for the next phase of their career, they fail to address its fit in their current role. This is like asking employees to jump over a river instead of building them a bridge.

Truly great leadership development programs help employees do their current role better so they can immediately put into practice what they learn. After mastering these skills, both parties can be confident the employee is ready for what comes next.

Customize leadership development for each employee so they can apply what they're learning in their day-to-day job. This helps employees see the benefits of their leadership development right away. It also encourages them to use the skills sooner rather than later.

### Expectation #2: They'll have fun

A 2015 West Unified Communication Services survey found that more than half of all employees want development material that is more interesting and engaging. While leadership development is pertinent to their job, they don't want it to feel like work.

#### The reality

Unfortunately, the same survey found that one out of three employees felt their leadership development experience was uninteresting. And if they're dozing off during the development sessions, it's unlikely they'll retain any of the information.

Make leadership development fun by incorporating a variety of learning methods. One-on-one coaching, online learning, and group classroom settings create different ways for material to be presented so it resonates with everyone.

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<https://www.shrm.org/hr-today/trends-and-forecasting/research-and-surveys/Documents/2016-Employee-Job-Satisfaction-and-Engagement-Report.pdf>

<https://www.westuc.com/en-us/blog/digital-media-services/state-employee-training-infographic>

### **Expectation #3: The work won't suffer**

Leadership development should complement, not hinder, employees' daily performance. Given that, it's no surprise that the aforementioned West Unified Communication Services survey found that 47 percent of employees want flexibility built into their development schedule. Another 34 percent want to be able to access their material from anywhere.

#### **The reality**

Quality leadership development takes time, but many employees are already overwhelmed by their workload. Adding a development program into the mix can force them to choose between one or the other. However, by giving participants flexibility or mobile access to content, they can fit it into their work more easily.

***Best Practice:** Make learning a group activity. Instead of having employees study material on their own, give them the opportunity to work and practice their skills with others not only in the sessions, but also outside of the training room. Establishing check-in sessions, and accountability partnerships will reinforce the goals and behaviors identified as part of the program. In fact, the West Unified Communication Services survey found that 45 percent of employees want to be able to interact with others during and throughout development programs.*

When choosing which program will work best for your employees, always look for a leadership solution that works with each employee's schedule. Consider how long lessons and coaching sessions are. If they'll require huge chunks of employees' time, know that either their performance or their development will suffer.

### **Expectation #4: Development will be long-term**

Employees understand learning takes time. In the West Unified Communication Services study, 41 percent said they'd like to spend more time developing leadership skills. They know that the more time they spend using their developing skills during the workday, the more they will improve.

#### **The reality**

Unfortunately, a 2017 Officevibe study found that 53 percent of employees don't believe they've significantly improved their skill set in the past year. That's because most leadership development training is about cramming a lot of information into a short amount of time. And there's rarely time for employees to practice their skills.

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[https://www.officevibe.com/state-employee-engagement ml?a=/content/dam/successfactors/en\\_us/resources/white-papers/leaders2020-global-factsheet.pdf](https://www.officevibe.com/state-employee-engagement ml?a=/content/dam/successfactors/en_us/resources/white-papers/leaders2020-global-factsheet.pdf)

Don't rush learning. Spread the information out and give designated times for employees to apply the skills they're developing. The theory behind leadership development is great, but being able to put that into action is more important. Transform the theory into personalized actions and behaviors. Doing so will make leadership development tangible and actionable for each participant.

Think of it this way: would you rather have a pilot who spent 1,000 hours training in a plane or one who spent the same amount of time merely reading about aerodynamics?

***Best Practice:*** Always track leadership development progress over time. Being able to see their improvement will show both you and them how their development is paying off. Assess leadership skills and behaviors before and after the leadership program or leadership coaching process.

### **Final Thoughts**

Your leadership development program can be as great as you imagine -- and everything your employees hope for. But to make those expectations a reality, make sure everyone is on the same page. Once you understand and align what your employees want and the organization needs, you can ensure everyone gets the right leadership development opportunities and your company is on track to greater performance.

## About Skyline Group

Skyline Group is the leading provider of scalable leadership solutions with a foundation built upon decades of executive coaching with some of the most recognized companies in the world. We are revolutionizing the leadership development industry with our C4X coaching platform. C4X is the only coaching solution that gives you the ability to develop all of your leaders consistently and systematically from onboarding to executive development. C4X combines a flexible technology platform (integrated assessment, content, metrics, and coach management system) with the personalized impact and connection of 1:1 coaching. Learn more at [www.SkylineGroup.com](http://www.SkylineGroup.com) and [www.C4X.com](http://www.C4X.com).